

WASHINGTON, DC – House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (MD) spoke on the House Floor tonight in support of the National Defense Authorization Act. Below are his remarks as prepared for delivery:

[Click here to view video of Leader Hoyer's Floor statement.](#)

“Democrats in Congress have worked closely with President Obama to fight our enemies, promote our interests and support our troops and their families—compiling a record of securing our nation in stronger and smarter ways. We have strengthened America’s military by putting new and better weapons into the battlefield, like more aerial drones; we have killed or captured much of the top leadership of al Qaeda and the Taliban; and for the first time, there is a clear plan for a way forward in Afghanistan, which was neglected for years under President Bush. Democrats, often in the face of Republican opposition, have increased funding for human intelligence collection, cybersecurity, and security for our skies, our ports, and our borders. And we are looking out for our troops, our veterans, and their families: Democrats are making sure that our troops get the body armor and mine-resistant vehicles they need when they’re in the field, and the health care and opportunity for college education they deserve when they return home.

“Today’s Defense Authorization bill builds on that record, authorizing crucial national security programs for Fiscal Year 2011. It promotes efforts to disrupt and destroy terrorist networks and strengthens the ability of our special forces to act directly against terrorist organizations.

“It increases our international cooperation against terrorists, especially against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the same time, it also insists on accountability, requiring semi-annual reports from the administration on the status of the Taliban and the capacity of the Afghan government and security forces. Because the threats we face have changed in a post-Cold War world, this bill also strongly supports ballistic missile defense and nuclear counterproliferation, including the President’s effort to secure all of the world’s known vulnerable nuclear material in the next four years.

“And this bill invests in the wellbeing of our troops and the strength of our Armed Forces. It keeps TRICARE strong and ensures that military families can keep their children on TRICARE policies up to the age of 26, just as all Americans can do under the health reform law. It also reduces strain on our forces by providing for 7,000 more personnel for the Army and 500 for the Air Force, while helping all of the services rebuild the equipment and weapons systems that have been severely worn down by two wars. “Finally, this bill strengthens our military by providing for the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, only after the Defense Department has heard from our troops, consulted with commanders, and completed its review. All the necessary regulations must be in place, and the President, Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs all must certify that repeal is consistent with military readiness, military effectiveness, unit cohesion, and recruiting. Discrimination against gays and lesbians takes a

very real toll on our national security. Don't Ask, Don't Tell has caused the dismissal of 13,500 men and women who wore our uniform with honor, put their lives on the line in service to us and this great nation—and only asked to serve their country on equal terms.

“Of the 13,500 who have been discharged, more than 1,000 filled ‘critical occupations,’ such as engineers and interpreters—including the 320 service members dismissed just months into the Iraq war, who spoke languages like Arabic and Farsi. Their hard-earned expertise would have been invaluable to us, but we chose to throw it away. Our closest allies, like Britain, Canada, and Israel, don't make the same mistake. They too have top-notch professional armies; and let us not forget that many of their soldiers are dying by our side in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Just as important are the countless gays and lesbians defending us as we speak. As Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued: ‘I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens. For me personally, it comes down to integrity—theirs as individuals and ours as an institution.’ The military supports the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and I believe we ought to listen.

“Many of the arguments spoken in favor of the exclusion and expulsion of gays and lesbians from our military have been heard before—when they were used to justify segregation in our military. In 1948, Senator Richard Russell said, ‘I cannot...vote to take boys of my State between the ages of 18 and 26, against their desire, into the armed services with the definite knowledge that the Commander in Chief proposes to intermingle the races in the most intimate relations of life. The morale and health of the men is sure to be adversely affected.’

“That thinking was wrong then—and it is wrong now. Then and now, the men and women who wear our uniform are more tolerant than many give them credit for. Gay and straight alike, they endure sacrifice and separation from their loved ones so that we don't have to. And every one of them deserves the right to do so with honesty about who they are.

“As a reluctantly anonymous service member recently wrote online: ‘I will risk my life, and in return, I ask to be treated simply like anyone else in the service—nothing more and nothing less.’”

###